Achebe portrays Okonkwo’s relationship with his children in various ways throughout the novel. In this essay, I will be focusing on his relationships with Nwoye, Ezinma, and Ikemefuna. The relationship between Okonkwo and his first-born son, Nwoye, is dysfunctional and strained because of the stark contrast in their personalities. Okonkwo is a blazing fire: fierce, tough, the embodiment of masculinity; he seldom openly shows emotion unless it is anger. Nwoye, in comparison, is emotional, sensitive, and intuitive. This is evident when Achebe writes, “Nwoye overheard it and burst into tears, whereupon his father beat him heavily,” in reference to the news of Ikemefuna returning to his village. This illustrates both how easily Nwoye is affected emotionally and how deeply Okonkwo despises this about him. To Okonkwo, emotion is a sign of weakness, and he associates weakness

with Unoka, his father, whom he resented. Nwoye strongly reminds Okonkwo of Unoka, and it troubles him. We see this when the author notes that at only twelve years old, Nwoye “was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness.” This shows how concerned Okonkwo is about this trait developing in his son; Unoka was flippant and indolent throughout Okonkwo’s childhood, and seeing similar traits in Nwoye feels like reopening an old wound. The author reiterates this later when Okonkwo confides in Obierika that Nwoye has “too much of his mother in him.” Obierika understands what Okonkwo truly means, as the following line confirms: “‘Too much of his grandfather,’ Obierika thought but he did not say it.” From this, the reader gains a clear understanding of why Okonkwo is so heavy-handed toward his eldest son. He believes Nwoye is too effeminate, not manly enough, and

constantly tries to make him more traditionally masculine. This idea is shown when Okonkwo encourages Nwoye and Ikemefuna to sit in his obi with him: “he told them stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed.” This suggests that Okonkwo is trying to get the boys accustomed to and interested in things he considers more manly, rather than the stories exchanged by the mothers and younger children, which he views as foolish and feminine. Achebe later describes Nwoye as a “sad-faced youth,” making clear how unhappy he was during his childhood under Okonkwo’s roof. Okonkwo’s incessant nagging and disapproval ultimately drive Nwoye to convert to Christianity. The lack of emotional connection between them leaves Nwoye feeling rejected and out of place in his own household, which makes the new faith appealing because it welcomes those considered outcasts.

Nwoye’s conversion is the final rupture in their relationship; it leads to Okonkwo disowning him. To Okonkwo, this act is unforgivable. His language afterwards, using terms such as “degenerate” and “abomination,” shows the depth of his outrage and the permanent break between father and son.

By comparison, Okonkwo’s bond with Ikemefuna is far more complex; where he sees weakness in Nwoye, he sees possibility in Ikemefuna. The boy is adopted into Okonkwo’s household and soon finds his place in it. Everyone in the family adjusts to his presence, especially Nwoye, who particularly enjoys Ikemefuna’s company. Achebe makes this clear when he writes that “Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy.” Other examples of this are when he notes that “[Okonkwo] allowed Ikemefuna to

accompany him, like a son," and that "indeed, Ikemefuna called him father." Ikemefuna was everything Okonkwo had hoped for in a son, hoped for in Nwoye: adaptable, hardworking, masculine. Okonkwo believed that Ikemefuna was a positive influence on his eldest son. Achebe reinforces this when he writes, "Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna." Here Achebe shows how Okonkwo expects a son of his to behave, how he would have treated Nwoye if he had been more like Ikemefuna. The boy himself starts to trust Okonkwo and become comfortable living with him. Achebe shows this when he writes that Ikemefuna "could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father." This demonstrates how crucial a figure Okonkwo was becoming in Ikemefuna's life. Okonkwo understood the depth of the boy's attachment, which is

why he was so deeply grieved when Ikemefuna died. We know this because it is written that he “did not taste any food for two days after the death” and that he had trouble sleeping. By using these words, Achebe makes it clear how deeply affected Okonkwo was by the incident, which is entirely uncharacteristic of him. He had been warned not to have anything to do with Ikemefuna’s death, but did not heed it, and instead delivered the final blow. Okonkwo is so disturbed because he knows the innocent boy looked up to him, and he had been the one to kill him.

Okonkwo’s relationship with Ezinma is unlike his relationships with either Nwoye or Ikemefuna. She draws out a gentler side of him that he refuses to show elsewhere. An example of this is when Ezinma falls ill and he shows great concern. Achebe writes that “Okonkwo sprang from his bed…and ran into

Ekwefi’s hut.” This shows how deeply he cared for his daughter and how urgently he felt the need to check on her, scrambling to prepare medicine for her. Another instance in which Achebe displays Okonkwo worrying about Ezinma is when Chielo comes to take her in the middle of the night and he is reluctant to hand her over. This is evident when the author uses the word “pleaded” to describe how he tries to bargain with Chielo to return another time, claiming that the girl had been sick of late and was asleep. This concern is reiterated when Okonkwo goes out in search of his daughter several times after she leaves. Ezinma was the only child who understood him. Achebe shows this when he writes, “Of all his children she alone understood his every mood.” Another example of this closeness appears when Okonkwo has Ezinma explain to her sister why they should get married in Umuofia;

Achebe notes that Okonkwo believed “she understood things so perfectly.” There are various implications in Achebe’s writing that Okonkwo wishes Ezinma had been born a boy. A clear example is when Okonkwo reflects that if she had been his son, he “would have been much happier,” and that she has “the right spirit.”

Overall, Okonkwo’s connections with Nwoye, Ezinma, and Ikemefuna show how deeply his desire to be strong and manly shape his behavior, as well as his fear of being perceived as weak. Each relationship highlights a different part of him, from the affection he refuses to admit to the expectations he forces onto others.